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'Hawk' or realist?

Reagan adviser Pipes insists he's the latter

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Richard Pipes arrived in America on his 17th birthday, July 11, 1940. He and his father and mother had fled from the Nazi invasion of Poland.

One of his most vivid memories of his new country was seeing an advertisement with a quotation from Benjamin Franklin.

"It said something like, 'Unforeseen events need not change the course of men's lives.' I laughed. I had witnessed the outbreak of war in Poland, seen my house destroyed, been forced to leave home and migrate thousands of miles."

The chasm between American optimism and the Eastern European experience of the ravages of war has shaped Richard Pipes' view of the world and, for the next few years, Pipes will have a hand in shaping America's foreign policy. The Harvard professor will be the specialist on the Soviet Union for the Reagan Administration's National Security Council.

He is one of the leading figures in a group of intellectuals who are lumped together under the label "neoconservative," many of whose members write for the combative Commentary magazine. Pipes shares with them a conviction that America has grown soft and sleepy about national defense and a determination to lead a reawakening.

Pipes says he and and like-minded members of the Committee on the Present Danger are "the same kind of people who, in 1936 or 1937, would have backed Churchill in England. [People who said] Germany is arming, preparing for war, and we are doing nothing."

Substitute the words "Soviet Union" for "Germany" and you have a rough notion of Pipes' approach to US-Soviet relations.

Pipes is the latest in a series of Soviet experts to serve in the highest councils in Washington. Like those who have preceded him, from Charles E. (Chip) Bohlen and George Kennan to Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Marshall Shulman, Pipes brings his own interpretation of US-Soviet relations to the job.

Although he shares a common Eastern European background with Kissinger and Brzezinski, Pipes is sharply critical of what he regards as their "ego trips," and of the doctrine of detente which Kissinger first espoused and more recently downplayed.

The problem with detente — the pursuit of arms limitation, trade agreements and a stabilized US-Soviet relationship — Pipes argues, is that the Russians aren't playing by the same rules. While American strategists talk about nuclear parity and deterrence, the Soviets are aiming for superiority and, ultimately, victory.

Often described as a "hardliner" or "hawk," Pipes prefers to think of himself as a realist.

"If you want to prevent nuclear war, or to contain the damage, you have to look at it realistically," Pipes said in an interview last week. "That does not mean I am in favor of nuclear war. You would have to be insane (to favor such a war) . . . I am a very pacific person I don't even own a gun."

Pipes is particularly critical of the notion, which he says has been sold to Americans by a succession of political leaders of both parties, that nuclear war is "unthinkable" and "unimaginable."

"The idea that the explosion of one nuclear bomb means the end of mankind leads to paralysis," he says. "You have to look at it very coldly . . . If a physician is confronted with a terrible disease, he is not likely to cure it by tearing his hair out. You want a physician who is cool."

A tall, slender man whose dark hair is in retreat from a high forehead, Pipes personifies cool. Juggling an interview and a steady stream of phone calls from well-wishers, he managed to be gracious, pleased and unflustered.

Pipes is an expert on 19th century Russian who has spent 34 of his 57 years at Harvard, first as a graduate student and then as a professor. As he tells it, if the Harvard history department had been more flexible, he might not be on his way to Washington now.

After a couple of years at a small college in Ohio and three years in the Air Force, Pipes came to Harvard interested in the history of art and philosophy, which he wanted to combine somehow with the Russian studies he had begun at Cornell under Air Force auspices. "The history department was very strictly set up, then and now," Pipes recalls, "and they said I couldn't do both. The regulations forced me to choose between Russian history and my other interests."

Pipes makes his home with his wife Irene in a handsome old house on a quiet side street in Cambridge. (Two grown sons live in other parts of the country.) Japanese prints, paintings and pieces of sculpture fill the rooms, evidence of his continuing interest in art. But other interests — in photography, cross country skiing and swimming — have fallen by the wayside in recent years as Pipes has devoted more and more of his time to the debate over US foreign policy.

He first caught the eye of Washington insiders in 1970 when he delivered a paper on US-Soviet relations to the American Historical Association. An aide to Sen. Henry Jackson (D-Wash.) liked the paper and Pipes became a consultant to Jackson's Permanent Committee on Investigations.

But it was not until 1976 that he gained national attention when he headed the "B-team," a group of non-governmental experts brought in by President Ford's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board to assess US estimates of Soviet strength. The experts looked at the same data used by the "A team," the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and came to startlingly different conclusions.

The team's highly critical report charged that the CIA had consistently underestimated the nature and extent of the Soviet threat. It warned that the Soviets would soon be militarily superior to the US and could use that superiority to force US withdrawal from crucial areas like the Mideast.

Coming in the midst of the Nixon-Ford era of relatively good relations with the Soviet Union, the report struck at the very foundations of the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) and created turmoil within the intelligence community.

Out of the "B team" came the Committee on the Present Danger (there was some membership overlap), and a widely-discussed article in Commentary in which Pipes set out his views on Soviet strategy.

In that article, entitled "Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight and Win a Nuclear War," he argued that Americans have been deluded into believing that the So-